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An unseasonably dry month of June has resulted in over a thousand wildfires across Northern California, including the worst fire in recent Butte County history.

Cal Fire provided me with a tour of the Humboldt Fire and a comprehensive briefing of the damages incurred by many property owners. Fire is one of the most devastating of all disasters, but it is heartening to listen to fire victims who vow to rebuild amid the charred landscapes and ashes. Our thoughts and prayers go out to those who lost their homes, and their unwavering spirit is an inspiration to all of us.

As usual, our firefighters displayed unparalleled bravery. Local, state and federal personnel traveled from all over California and Nevada, some driving through the night, to provide mutual aid. We witnessed example after example of how our firefighters served as human backstops against the fires. Their actions are nothing short of heroic and hundreds of homes were saved because of them.

Cal Fire also demonstrated exemplary leadership and California is to be commended for their solid and event-tested Incident Command System. Communication is always the key in disasters and their top-notch public information detail kept the North State and nation fully informed.

We are grateful for the efforts of the volunteers, law enforcement, non-profit organizations, animal rescue groups, state and local agencies, along with North State businesses who aided in this massive undertaking. The community is filled with pride as we reflect on the teamwork and cooperation that brought together the model for rapid response and action.

And thanks and appreciation must go to our local media. Through timely reporting, updates and internet postings, they kept the community informed on real time developments during the Humboldt Fires.

While we focus on recovery, there are many questions that come to mind with regard to an escape route for Ridge residents and how to protect our citizens from the next fire. Where do we go from here?

For many years, I have supported the escape route from Paradise through Sterling City, Inskip out to Butte Meadows and Highway 32. Since 2000, I have helped secure \$12 million in federal funding for the roadway. The construction of this escape route is critically important for ridge residents and I have consistently pursued federal support.

Under federal law, however, transportation projects that use federal dollars require matching funding from the state and local governments. We have reached a point in the funding stream where most of the allowed federal contribution is ready and waiting. I have requested additional funding in the FY 2009 Transportation Appropriations bill, which, if successful, will allow us to reach the maximum level of federal funding. We are also going to need help at the state and local level in securing the rest of the necessary funds to complete the \$19 million project. Construction is set to begin this year and continued support from all levels of government is critical.

The recent fires across our region also serve as a reminder that we need to allow professionals to strategically thin unhealthy dense forest conditions to reduce the threat of wildfires and protect people and communities. In that vein, the Firesafe Councils are to be commended for their efforts on behalf of the local communities. The only way to truly protect our communities is through an aggressive program of strategic forest management that will make our forests more fire resilient

Again, I want to commend everyone for your overwhelming response to the Humboldt Fire. We will remain forever indebted to your caring heart and the unwavering support of our community.